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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001329

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/11/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ETRD](#) [KDEM](#) [MO](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH ROYAL ADVISOR MEZIANE BELFQIH

REF: A. 05 RABAT 356  
[1](#)B. RABAT 1105  
[1](#)C. RABAT 308

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Building on his early 2005 meeting, Ambassador met July 11 with Palace Advisor Meziane Belfqih to discuss his views on US-Moroccan relations, recent GOM crackdowns on Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) activities, and the 2007 parliamentary elections. Belfqih said his March 2006 comments regarding US-Moroccan relations had been misreported by the press and that his intent was to encourage Moroccans to think about diversifying relations beyond traditional allies in Europe. Turning to the JCO, Belfqih said that recent JCO activities represent an attempt to test the established limits, which it does "from time to time." Belfqih delivered a detailed description of the draft electoral code, explaining that it is a step towards the transition of the political environment to "several" coherent political blocs. While stressing that the details of the electoral code are important, Belfqih explained that it is more important for Morocco that elections be clear, transparent, and fair. Belfqih thanked the Ambassador for his review of the IRI poll's objectives. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On July 11, Ambassador met with Palace Advisor Meziane Belfqih to review current US-Moroccan relations and the state of play on domestic political issues, including the 2007 election preparations, current crackdown on JCO activities, and US support for the electoral process. Ambassador was accompanied by Poloff (notetaker) during the ninety-minute meeting, while Belfqih was accompanied by his assistant Reda Hamedoun. On economic issues, Ambassador explained the benefits and advantages to the Moroccan population of the US-Morocco Free-Trade Agreement and the Millennium Challenge Account. Belfqih welcomed the remarks, saying he thinks Morocco is on a "good trend" with respect to its development on social, economic, and political issues.

[1](#)3. (C) Press articles concerning a speech he delivered in March reportedly suggesting that Morocco should reevaluate its policy with the US were inaccurate and taken out of context, Belfqih said. Hamedoun, Belfqih's assistant, added that having a free press also means that journalists are free to publish inaccurate stories. Belfqih explained, first and

foremost, that his comments were meant for a Moroccan audience. He said his intention was to explain to all Moroccans that Morocco must diversify its relations in order to further its development and progress on political, economic, and social issues. Morocco cannot continue to rely on the support of Europe, he said. Continuing his line that the comments were meant to spark interest in the United States, Belfqih said he wanted to urge Moroccans to search out more opportunities to work with the US, adding "it is necessary to do more with the US."

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JCO: Doing Big Things  
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14. (C) The Ambassador raised the recent police and Ministry of Interior orchestrated crackdowns on the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO) activities across Morocco (ref B), asking if this represented a shift in GOM policy towards the JCO. In response, Belfqih dismissed the idea that the GOM has changed its policy, but said that recent JCO activities -- referring to the "Open Doors" campaign -- represent an increase in magnitude of their public activities. "They are doing things on a larger scale," he said. Belfqih argued that much like the JCO's support in the summer of 2003 of an initiative to segregate beaches into sections for males and females, the recent increase in JCO activities could be viewed as the JCO testing the limits, trying to see what the public and government will accept. The JCO does this "from time to time," he said. When pressed by the Ambassador, Belfqih explained that in his view the JCO's internal dynamic is complex and not all supporters agree on the JCO's future and the objectives of the organization.

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15. (C) In response to Belfqih's question concerning JCO representative Nadia Yassine's recent trip to the United States, Ambassador explained that her trip was completely private, was not sponsored by the USG, nor did she visit the Department of State. Belfqih jokingly replied, "why would she visit the Department of State?" In addition, Belfqih said "her republic is more like the republic of Ayatollah Khomeini." Briefly turning to the JCO's spiritual leader Abdessalam Yassine, Belfqih said, "nobody is eternal, not even him." Belfqih closed the discussion on the JCO by warning that it is necessary to be "alert, and not naive" when it comes to the JCO.

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2007 Legislative Elections  
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16. (C) Turning the conversation towards the 2007 legislative elections, Belfqih said he has full confidence that the elections will be successful, adding that "there is no need to worry." Belfqih noted the draft electoral code had been recently submitted to parliament. (NOTE: The government-drafted electoral code was submitted July 6 to parliament for discussion and adoption, after being approved by the Council of Government and Council of Ministers respectively. END NOTE.) Belfqih explained that, in order to run for office in 2007, a candidate must belong to a party that is already represented in parliament, received at least three percent of the popular vote in 2002; or, if the candidate belongs to a party with no members of parliament, the candidate must obtain 500 signatures (400 from voters and 100 from elected officials) to validate participation in the 2007 elections. In addition, for a political party to be represented in parliament in 2007 the party must receive at least seven percent of the total vote.

17. (C) Belfqih said that the new electoral code is a conscious step to reduce the 28 plus registered political parties now operating in Morocco and to move towards "several" coherent political blocs. Everyone is in

agreement, he said, that in 10 or 15 years Morocco's political landscape will be one with strong conservative, centrist, and leftist blocs that will facilitate the work of government and be more efficient than the current system. He also explained the principal question remaining, and one that political parties continually debate, as "how does Morocco arrive at 3 unified blocs?" The current ruling majority, led by the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), believes this vision can be best achieved if smaller political parties are consolidated into the "larger" parties that already exist, Belfqih said. Belfqih, for his part, said that in the future there will be two blocs left standing: one lead by the PJD and the other lead by the "left" because these two movements are the best structured today. While acknowledging that percentage thresholds embodied in the electoral code are important, Belfqih stressed that it is more important that the 2007 and subsequent elections are clear, transparent, and fair. He said the real key for Morocco is that it makes progress, adding that too much change too quickly only serves to confuse voters.

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IRI Poll and Voter Concerns  
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18. (C) On the International Republican Institute (IRI) poll, which generated substantial comment in the Moroccan press after summaries of it appeared in the March 18 issue of Moroccan French-language weekly Le Journal (ref C), Ambassador reviewed the objectives of the poll and explained that it was done to benefit the political parties. Belfqih appreciated the explanation, thanking the Ambassador for clarifying several misconceptions about the poll and its results, particularly the theoretical vote question showing a large percentage of undecided voters are leaning towards the PJD. Belfqih, who was clearly intrigued by the PJD question, said it is important to know that the PJD is seen by voters to be a "refuge" party.

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19. (C) Belfqih added that the RI poll was particularly interesting because the GOM had done a survey celebrating the 50-year anniversary of Morocco's independence where the population was asked a set of similar questions. According to Belfqih, the survey showed that the public has more confidence in the work of NGOs than they do in political parties. He wondered why this is the case and how this can be changed. While highlighting IRI results showing job creation and unemployment as the main concerns for respondents, and that it was "the government" that was cited as being responsible for solving the problem, Ambassador stressed the importance of political parties using this valuable knowledge when formulating their platforms for the 2007 elections. Belfqih, in response, said he is sure unemployment and job creation will be present in all of the campaigns, however, what remains to be seen is how credible discourse will be. Belfqih argued that candidates must go beyond rhetoric, saying "they must go further" and provide specifics on how to fight unemployment. In closing, Belfqih disclosed that the government is in the process of drafting a law on polling that it hopes to get through parliament "quickly."

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COMMENT  
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110. (C) Although traditionally viewed as the palace expert on education issues, Belfqih's in-depth knowledge and authoritative comments on key issues like US-Moroccan relations, the JCO, and the 2007 elections demonstrates that his influence probably extends well beyond his portfolio. Raising the issue of his March 2006 comments on US-Moroccan relations, Belfqih's response seemed at times scripted and bordered on disingenuous. It appeared the main objective of the meeting for Belfqih was to assuage any concerns regarding US-Moroccan relations. Belfqih's comments on the Moroccan

political landscape in 10 to 15 years are telling, not only  
shedding light on previous comments about a "transparent  
majority" leading the country, but also highlighting that the  
transition of Morocco's political parties will be gradual and  
steady, at least in the Palace's view.

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